

Teachers' Research Engagement: Insights from Ethiopian Public Universities

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Abstract: -

Research engagement is widely regarded as an essential component of professional development for language teachers, contributing to the improvement of their teaching practices. In Ethiopia, research engagement is a key responsibility for university instructors, including English language teachers. However, there is limited systematic evidence concerning the research engagement of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. This study seeks to investigate the research engagement of Ethiopian EFL teachers and the challenges they encounter in public universities within the Amhara Region. A descriptive survey design was employed, with data collected from 162 randomly selected EFL teachers across four public universities through a questionnaire. The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings reveal that there is low levels of research engagement among EFL teachers. Key factors hindering research engagement include a lack of institutional support, promotion restrictions, and limited access to academic resources, such as journals and books. Teachers who engaged in research were driven by professional development and career advancement, with a significant emphasis on fulfilling institutional responsibilities. Moreover, significant differences in research engagement were observed based on teachers' qualifications and experience. Based on these findings, recommendations are proposed to foster greater research engagement among EFL teachers.

Keywords: Challenges, EFL Teachers, Ethiopia, professional development, public universities, research engagement.

1. Introduction

Scientific research is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of knowledge creation and societal advancement. It is powerful in addressing complex challenges, fostering innovation, and shaping the trajectory of social, economic, and cultural development [1]. As noted, research is essential not only in advancing scientific understanding but also in influencing societal norms and behaviors towards improved living conditions [2]. In the 21st century, the role of research has become more crucial than ever, as societies are increasingly dependent on the production and dissemination of new knowledge to meet evolving demands [3, 4]. The importance of research extends beyond mere knowledge generation; it is viewed as a key driver of the development, competitiveness, and global status of individuals, organizations, and nations [5, 4].

Research engagement is one of the core responsibilities of university faculty members within academia. The pressure to engage in research has strengthened, especially as research productivity has become a primary criterion in university rankings and the assessment of institutional performance (6, 7, 8). Institutions worldwide have implemented performance-based research evaluation systems to enhance their competitiveness, leading to heightened expectations for faculty to produce research and publish in prestigious journals (9). Consequently, the publication of research is not only an academic imperative but also a career-defining factor. As Körner (10) suggests, researchers are frequently evaluated based on the quality and quantity of their published work. Thus, research output plays a significant role in professional advancement, with faculty members often facing immense pressure to meet institutional demands for publication (11). The Ethiopian higher education system, governed by the Higher Education Proclamation of 2009, also underlines the importance of research as a central pillar of universities.

Teacher engagement in research, particularly among language teachers, has been extensively examined in the literature, with many studies emphasizing its potential benefits for professional development and improved

teaching practices (12, 13, 14). Borg (13) and Mehrani (15) argue that research engagement can empower teachers to adopt more reflective, evidence-based practices in their classrooms, thereby enhancing student outcomes.

Despite its importance, English language teachers' engagement in research remains relatively limited across the globe. Borg (16) found that while research engagement is often promoted as a path to professional development, language teachers in many countries report low levels of involvement in formal research activities. Borg (12), in a comprehensive study of 505 English teachers from 13 countries, identified several barriers that hinder teachers from engaging in research. These barriers include time constraints, limited research knowledge, and inadequate access to resources. Teachers who did engage in research were often motivated by practical concerns, such as improving their classroom practices, rather than by external incentives like promotion or institutional recognition. Borg (13) also underscored that teacher research tends to be individualistic and technicist, focusing mainly on solving immediate, practical problems rather than contributing to broader theoretical discussions.

Research engagement is also a core responsibility of university teachers in Ethiopia, as emphasized by the Higher Education Proclamation (2009) and reflected in the mission and vision statements of Ethiopian universities (17, 18). Despite these policy mandates, a significant gap exists between the expectations and the actual research participation of university teachers, particularly those teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This disparity is concerning, as research is essential not only for academic advancement but also for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in dynamic fields like EFL, where methodologies evolve rapidly (19).

A growing body of literature highlights several barriers to research engagement, including limited time, inadequate institutional support, and professional isolation (12). Studies within Ethiopia reveal similar challenges. For instance, Firdissa (20) found that although EFL teachers at Addis Ababa University recognized the importance of action research, their engagement was constrained by factors such as lack of motivation, limited time, insufficient funding, and heavy workloads. Abebe and Firdisa (21) identified additional barriers, including inadequate publication incentives and limited collaborative opportunities, at Wollega University. While these studies provide valuable insights, they are limited in scope, focusing on individual institutions without offering a comprehensive view across multiple universities.

The present researcher's observations and professional experiences, as a coordinator of the research office at Woldia University, further underscore these challenges. Heavy teaching loads, a lack of research resources, and institutional pressures continue to hinder research engagement. Such low participation undermines not only the professional development of EFL teachers but also the overall quality of education in Ethiopian universities.

While some local studies have identified key challenges, there is limited research examining how factors such as academic qualifications and experience influence teachers' research engagement. Borg (13) and Mehrani (15) suggest that more experienced and better-qualified teachers tend to engage more in research, but practical constraints often limit their participation. Despite increasing awareness of these issues, little research has specifically examined on EFL teachers' research engagement in the Ethiopian context.

2. Objectives

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the extent of research engagement among EFL teachers in public universities in Amhara Region. The study focuses on the following objectives:

1. To investigate the extent of EFL teachers' engagement in research.
2. To find out the reasons EFL teachers provide for their engagement or lack of engagement in research.
3. To analyze the impact of qualifications and experience on EFL teachers' research engagement and determine if these factors lead to statistically significant differences.

3. Methods

Research Design

This study investigates the research engagement of EFL teachers in public universities in Amhara Region, Ethiopia. To achieve this objective, a descriptive survey design was adopted, as it provides a precise representation of the phenomenon under investigation. Descriptive surveys are well-suited for portraying the existing conditions, enabling researchers to capture an accurate reflection of the current situation [22]. Therefore, this design was chosen to effectively describe the present state of EFL teachers' research engagement in the targeted universities.

Sampling

The study focuses on 10 public universities in the Amhara Region. Due to the challenges of managing research across all institutions, a sample of universities was selected. Recognizing that factors such as infrastructure, resources, and institutional experience can influence research engagement, the universities were stratified based on their generation of establishment. Using a stratified random sampling technique, four universities were chosen: one from the first generation (Bahir Dar University), two from the second generation (Debre Birhan University and Wollo University), and one from the third generation (Debre Tabor University). Debre Markos University was included for pilot testing. Fourth-generation universities were excluded from the study due to their limited research experience, as they are relatively new. A simple random sampling technique was employed to select 30% of the participants from the target population, a proportion considered representative of the larger group.

Method of Data Collection

Questionnaire

The primary tool for data collection was a questionnaire on research engagement, developed based on insights from relevant literature. The questionnaire was divided into two parts:

1. Background Information: This section gathered demographic data, such as the participants' experience and qualifications.
2. Research Engagement: This section, adapted from Borg (2009), was divided into three subsections:
 - (i) The frequency of conducting research (with responses ranging from 1: never to 4: often).
 - (ii) A list of 12 potential reasons for conducting research.
 - (iii) A list of 11 potential barriers to conduct research.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

To ensure validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by teachers at Woldia University, who provided feedback on the clarity and relevance of the items. Revisions were made based on their suggestions.

The reliability of the questionnaire was also tested to ensure that the items consistently generated the required data. Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient. A pilot test was conducted at Debre Markos University, and the reliability scores ranged between 0.67 and 0.78, indicating acceptable levels of reliability.

Data Analysis

The data gathered were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS version 24. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to analyze the questionnaire data and provide a reliable interpretation of the findings. Besides, ANOVA was applied to investigate whether differences in EFL teachers' research engagement could be attributed to demographic factors such as qualifications and experience.

4. Results

This study aimed to investigate EFL teachers' research engagement in public universities in Amhara Region, Ethiopia. The following section presents the results based on the research questions.

Demographic Information

The participants' demographic information, specifically their teaching experience and academic rank, is presented in Table 1. The data show a range of teaching experience among the participants, with 37% having 11–15 years of experience, followed by 29.6% with 6–10 years, 14.8% with 1–5 years, 11.1% with 16–20 years, and 7.4% with more than 20 years of teaching experience.

In terms of academic rank, the majority of participants were lecturers (66.7%), followed by assistant professors (29.6%) and associate professors (3.7%).

Table 1: Demographic Information

Years of teaching experience	N	%
1-5	24	14.8
6-10	48	29.6
11-15	60	37
16-20	18	11.1
Above 20	12	7.4
Academic Rank		
Graduate Assistant		
Lecturer	108	66.7
Assistant Professor	48	29.6
Associate Professor	6	3.7
Professor		
Other		

Research Engagement

The second part of the survey focused on the participants' research engagement, including how often they conducted research and the reasons for their involvement or lack thereof.

Frequency of Research Engagement

Table 2 presents data on how frequently teachers engage in research. Out of the 162 teachers, 18.5% reported never engaging in research, 22.2% reported doing so rarely, 51.9% indicated they sometimes conducted research, and only 7.4% said they engaged in research often.

Table 2: Frequency of Research Engagement (N = 162)

Frequency	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
N	30	36	84	12
%	18.5	22.2	51.9	7.4

However, the interpretation of "sometimes" should be interpreted cautiously, as it may indicate only occasional or incidental involvement in research activities (Borg, 2009). Therefore, the actual level of research engagement could be lower than reported, which is surprising considering that conducting research is a key responsibility for university academics.

Differences in Research Engagement by Qualification and Experience

Table 3 shows data pertaining to differences of teachers' research engagement in terms of qualifications and experience. Significant difference was found in mean scores of respondents in both qualification and experience, $F(2, 159) = 9.6$, $p=0.00$ and $F(4, 157) = 7.94$, $p<0.00$ respectively. That is, higher levels of engagement in research were reported by teachers with higher levels of qualifications and experience.

Table 3: ANOVA of respondents' research engagement differences in demographic factors

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Qualifications Between Groups	13.528	2	6.764	9.696	0.00
Within Groups	110.917	159	.698		
Total	124.444	161			
Experience Between Groups	20.944	4	5.236	7.943	0.00
Within Groups	103.500	157	.659		
Total	124.444	161			

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

Reasons for Conducting Research

Participants who reported engaging in research at least "sometimes" ($N = 96$) were asked to indicate their reasons for doing so. Table 4 summarizes the most commonly cited reasons, which include professional development (51.8%), promotion (44.4%), and the perception that conducting research is an important part of their role as faculty members (40.7%). The primary motivations for engaging in research were related to professional development and career advancement, with a significant emphasis on fulfilling institutional responsibilities.

Table 4: Reasons for Conducting Research ($N = 96$)

Reasons for Not Conducting Research

Participants who rarely or never engaged in research ($N = 66$) were asked to identify reasons for their lack of involvement. Table 5 presents the key barriers, including lack of support from management (26.1%), restrictions on promotion to assistant professor (14.8%), and limited access to academic resources, such as books and journals (14.8%).

No	Reasons	N	%
1	It is an important part as my work as a faculty member	66	40.7
2	It is good for my professional development	84	51.8
3	I enjoy it	42	25.9
4	It will help me get promotion	72	44.4
5	It is as part of a course I am studying on	18	11.1
6	Administration expects me to	6	3.7
7	Other teachers can learn from the findings of my work	18	11.1
8	to contribute to the improvement of my department/institution	54	32.2
9	to find better ways of teaching	36	22.2
10	to solve problems in my teaching	56	36.8

11	it allows me to collaborate with colleagues	48	29.6
12	Others (Please specify)	6	3.7

Table 5: Reasons for Not Conducting Research (N = 66)

Reason	N	%
I do not know enough about research methods	12	7.4
I do not have time for research	6	3.7
Management discourages it	42	26.1
I need someone to advise me but no one is available	18	11.1
Most of my colleagues do not do research	12	7.4
I do not have access to the books and journals I need	24	14.8
Other teachers would not co-operate if I asked their help	18	11.1
promotion to an assistant professor is prohibited by MOE	24	14.8
Other reasons	2	8

The most frequently cited barriers were lack of institutional support, limited access to scholarly resources, and restrictive promotion policies, which collectively hinder teachers' research engagement.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the research engagement of EFL teachers in public universities within the Amhara Region of Ethiopia. The first research question focused on the extent of teachers' engagement in research. The findings indicated that participation levels were moderate to low, with over 51% of the teachers stating they conducted research at least "sometimes" (Table 2). However, as cautioned, such terms as "often" and "sometimes" may be interpreted differently by respondents, potentially masking the reality of research engagement [12]. In some cases, "sometimes" may actually imply rare engagement, aligning with findings that also reported low research engagement among teachers [12].

Other studies found higher levels of engagement in different contexts. For example, 73% of College English teachers in China and 68% of university teachers in Saudi Arabia reported engaging in research [23, 24]. These higher rates underscore the unexpectedly low engagement among Ethiopian teachers, given the significant role research plays in the academic responsibilities of university faculty [25]. Research engagement is seen as a key component of academic life in many other countries, but in Ethiopia, this study's findings suggest it is far from being fully realized.

The study also identified significant differences in research engagement based on teachers' qualifications and experience. More experienced and highly qualified teachers were significantly more likely to engage in research. This supports findings by earlier studies, which also established a strong relationship between research engagement and both experience and qualifications [12, 26]. This pattern suggests that universities should implement mentorship programs where experienced researchers support less-experienced faculty in developing research skills, potentially fostering a more collaborative research environment.

In addressing the second research question, the study examined the reasons behind teachers' lack of engagement in research. The findings highlighted several institutional barriers, including limited support from university management, a lack of promotion to assistant professor status, and restricted access to research materials (Table 3). These obstacles point to a weak research culture within Ethiopian universities, as also noted by other studies

[18]. Institutional support and access to materials are critical for fostering research engagement [12, 23]. The lack of these resources in Ethiopia creates a significant gap between local universities and their counterparts in countries like China and Saudi Arabia, where research is better supported.

Despite these challenges, some teachers reported engaging in research for professional development, promotion, and fulfilling their responsibilities as faculty members (Table 4). Promotion, in particular, played a significant role in motivating research activities; this finding aligns with findings from other research, which observed that professional development is often driven by external rewards rather than intrinsic interest [25]. While professional development can be a strong motivator, making research a criterion for promotion can shift the focus away from genuine academic inquiry and collaboration [12]. Instead, research may become more of an administrative task rather than a meaningful pursuit of knowledge. To create a more productive research environment, it is essential for universities to provide financial and moral support for research activities, as teacher engagement in research could enhance the university's reputation and its standing within the academic community.

To sum up, research engagement is widely regarded as a critical component of professional development for language teachers, contributing significantly to improved pedagogical practices and academic growth. In Ethiopian higher education institutions, research is a core responsibility of faculty members, with expectations that teachers actively participate in research activities. However, this study has revealed low levels of research engagement among EFL teachers in public universities. Key factors contributing to this low participation include insufficient institutional support, restrictive promotion policies, and limited access to essential academic resources, such as journals and books. These barriers suggest a need for systemic reforms to foster a more robust research culture within Ethiopian universities.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Make research engagement mandatory: Research should be a compulsory requirement for academic staff, rather than an optional activity, to ensure consistent participation.
- Enhance incentive mechanisms: Universities should develop or improve incentive programs to reward and encourage faculty members who actively engage in research activities.
- Re-evaluate promotion policies: The Ethiopian Ministry of Education (MOE) should reassess the restrictions on promotion to assistant professor status, as these limitations are discouraging research engagement.
- Improve access to research resources: English Language Teaching (ELT) materials, including books and journals, should be made more readily available to EFL teachers, ensuring they have the resources necessary to engage in research.
- Establish mentoring platforms: Universities should create forums such as seminars and workshops where experienced researchers can mentor and share their expertise with less-experienced faculty, fostering collaboration and professional growth.

It is important to acknowledge that the small sample size and the use of quantitative data collection methods (i.e., questionnaires) may limit the generalizability of this study's findings. As such, the results should be interpreted with caution. Future research should consider larger sample sizes and adopt a broader range of data collection methods, including interviews and focus group discussions, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of EFL teachers' research engagement.

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Competing interests

The author declare that there is no competing interests related to the content of this article.

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